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LOSS OF MATCHES COST ELEVEN LIVES

Men Who Put Off Columbian in
Lifeboat Were Often
Near Rescue.

CUTTER SERVICE HEAD SEES LESSON IN TRAGEDY

Safety Matches, Flash Powder or
Electric Signals Are Recom-
mended for Sea Safety.

The terrible experience of four men in a boat, survivors of the crew of fifteen of the British steamer Columbian, abandoned on fire at sea, May 4, who after fourteen days afloat in an open lifeboat were picked up by the revenue cutter Seneca, might all have been averted and their companies' lives saved had there been even a dry match aboard. For the night of the very day the lifeboat cast off from the Columbian, a big ocean steamer passed within a mile and a half of the castaways, and would not have failed to see the faintest glimmer of light from the lifeboat; but their match supply had been dampened by spray, and there was no other signal apparatus aboard.

"The inability of these men to make a night signal," comments Capt. C. E. Johnston, commanding the Seneca, in his report of the rescue made to the revenue cutter service, "seems to point out that something should be provided that water will not spoil. I would suggest that for safety at sea each boat be supplied with a hand electric torch and three or four spare batteries for it. By means of this torch they could not only make a light, but could send Morse code signals."

Is Lesson of Sea.

This is the lesson of the sea that may result in some government regulation for navigation under the American flag, and perhaps produce international action of some sort. The convention for safety of life at sea, adopted by the international conference on safety at sea, held in London, January 20, this year, is now pending before the United States Senate. If approved, to carry out the spirit of the convention, regulations to govern American navigation would be imposed either by direct law of Congress or through authority which might be vested in the steamboat inspection service of the United States.

"Had the international convention for the safety of life at sea been in force at the time," comments Capt. E. A. Berthoff, commandant of the revenue cutter Seneca, "the lifeboat of the Columbian in compliance with its provisions, would have been adequately equipped with signal lights. Item G, section 2, article 40 of the convention, requires that every boat and every pontoon raft shall be provided with a number of self-igniting 'red lights' and a watertight box of matches."

Capt. Berthoff was one of the American plenipotentiaries at the London conference. He had much to do with framing the proposed convention, and is anxious for the evolution of appliances that will add greater security to travel at sea.

Near Other Boats.

The lifeboat of the Columbian with its human freight, doomed to be lightered from fifteen to four men before rescue, after seeing the big steamer the night of their first day out, were within four and two miles of two other steamers the following day, but were not seen, and could not attract attention. Not another vessel was seen by them until the Seneca picked them up. In the meantime, with food gone, they subsisted on leather mixed with crumbs, and short allowance of water. One man drank sea water and died delirious. A second went violently insane, and died when put in restraint. A cabin boy had dreamed of the catastrophe before he sailed from his home in Antwerp, and that he would be fourteen days afloat in an open boat; he died a few hours before rescue, and seven was the toll of starvation and exposure.

The suggestion made by Capt. Johnston of the Seneca, that lifeboats be equipped with an electric torch and batteries, useful for flash and signal purposes, is interesting nautical circles. There is considerable discussion of the value of the idea, although the practicability is not doubted. Byron R. Newton, assistant secretary of the Treasury, in charge of the revenue cutter service, is much impressed with the suggestion. He intends that a test shall be made of what he regards as an original thought, specifically at sea. For there are many ways of providing for night signals, but no law to enforce them as equipment for lifeboats on merchantmen in international commerce.

Some Are Skeptical.

Any flashing light is generally regarded by mariners as an adequate night signal. There is some measure of skepticism as to the value of a signal device which would permit use of code signals. Still, there is no reason to regard that additional attribute as a detriment. If the signal light itself has sufficient ranging power to attract attention at long range, but until the pending international convention is put into effect by ratification, and followed by specific regulations for navigation, putting into effect the provisions of the convention in respect to vessels flying the flag of each respective national party to the convention, merchantmen will provide against sea catastrophes as seems best to each of them, or in part or not at all. It is hoped by those who are interested in safety at sea that the ratification of the convention will be the means of imposing the duty of providing "boat boxes" as equipment for every lifeboat on the sea or navigable waters.

The vessels of the United States Navy and of the revenue cutter service, and, in fact, all ships owned by the United States government, are subject to regulations which aim to provide for the emergency use of lifeboats. All lifeboats must be equipped with "boat boxes," boat equipment for locomotion, such as oars and rowlocks, rudder, mast and sail, and also lanterns and bailers, also a provisions box, lardered with hard bread and canned meats, must always be stowed away handy so that it can be put aboard without delay.

Contains Equipment.

The "boat box" is supposed to contain hatchet, coal chisel, boat calking iron, ratchet tool handle, marine spike, "palm," sail needles, packages of assorted nails, screws and tacks, a piece of sheet lead, wire "sealing," lamp wick, spun yarn, fish hooks, lines and sinkers, lead line, tallow candles, white lead, safety matches in a hermetically sealed box, a medical emergency package, a can of illuminating oil and six Caston lights. The Caston lights are provided for signaling purposes. Caston lights are a composition of Greek fire, each is waterproof, about six inches long and an inch and a half in diameter. Set alight, they give a flashing light, visible for miles, and burning brightly for four or five minutes. Conservative mariners regard these as the best device for night signaling purposes. There is some question whether an electric light could be adapted to signal purposes so as to give a light of sufficient strength. But that will be made.

The revenue cutter service would have no jurisdiction over American shipping. But the result of its experiments would be of profit to the steamboat inspection service and to Congress in legislating for safety at sea.

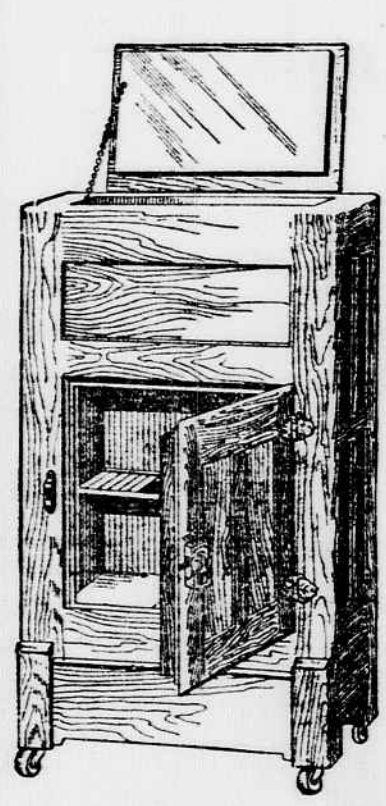
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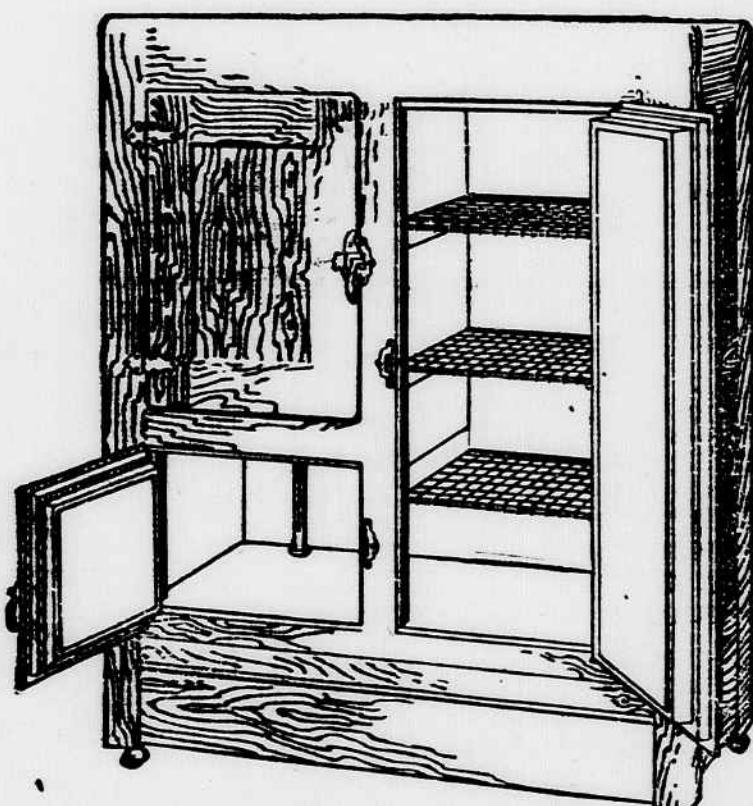
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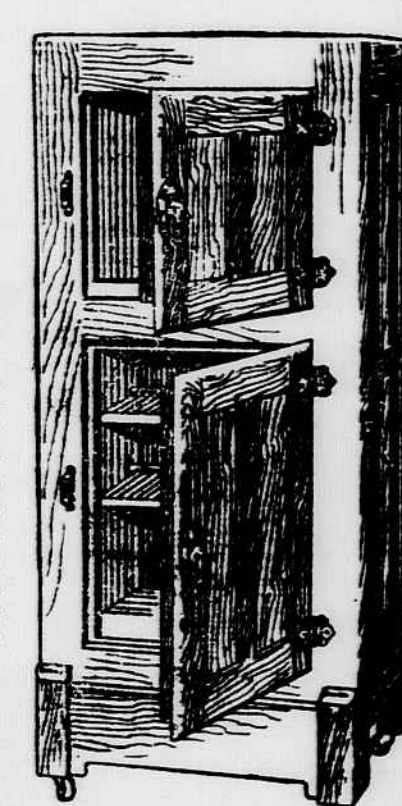
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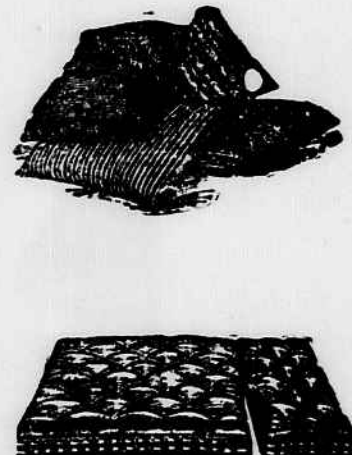
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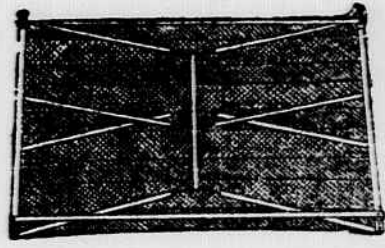
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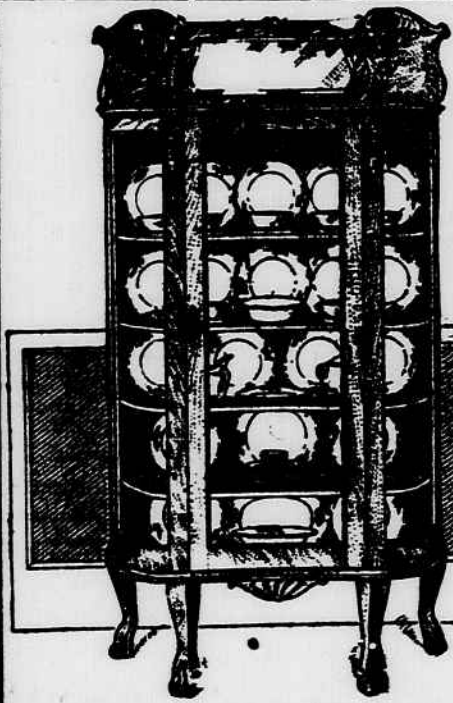
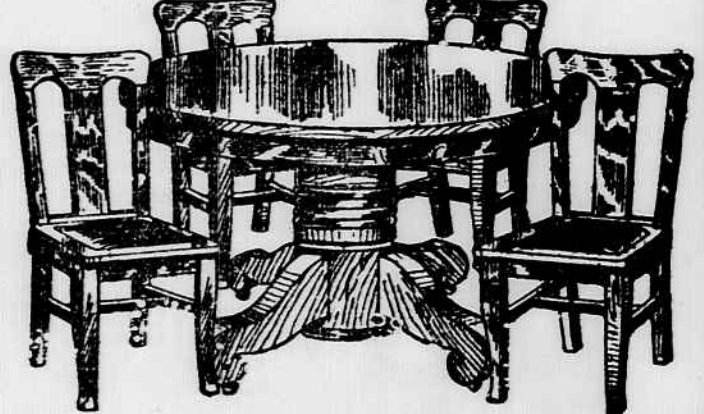
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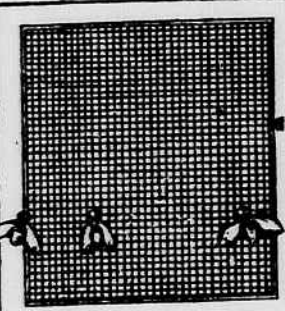
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